



Instrumentalizing Arabism: Morocco and the Inter-Arab System

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more appropriate to emphasize Morocco's African identity? Or a North African one? Or its ethnic Amazigh underpinnings? Or a uniquely Moroccan synthesis of all of Morocco's diverse societal elements and historical experiences?²

The search for a definitive formula that would define Morocco's national character and collective identity, while understandable, obfuscates more than clarifies. After all, social, ethnic and political identities are always constructed, fluid and subject to modification. Attaining a fuller understanding of Moroccan national identity requires a detailed examination and contextualization of the various components that have shaped the Moroccan polity and Moroccan society over both the *longue durée* and the country's modern history. This study concentrates on one of those aspects, heretofore underrepresented in the professional literature: the Moroccan kingdom's relations with fellow members of the League of Arab States, which Morocco joined in 1958, two years after regaining its independence from France. The analysis demonstrates how the ebbs and flows of Moroccan involvement in broader Arab affairs over the course of more than six decades was driven by a combination of "realist" factors (*raison d'état*/pursuit of national interest/power calculations), and domestic political considerations, centering on maintaining the legitimacy and hegemony of the monarchy and a sufficient degree of national cohesion.

Arabism and the Arab state system – Center and periphery

Arabism (*'uruba*), the idea that speakers of the Arabic language constituted a distinct human collective whose cultural and ultimately political demands needed to be addressed, first emerged from the lands of Ottoman Syria (*Bilad al-Sham*) during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While a number of factors contributed to its rise, the central one was its connection to the promotion of Islamic reform (*islah*). Eventually, Arabism would be concretized as Arab nationalism. Following the defeat and dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire, intellectuals, publicists, and activists disseminated an overarching doctrine that promised dignity and power to the populations of the "Arab homeland" (*al-watan al-'Arabi*). As C. Ernest Dawn showed in his seminal article about Arab history textbooks in the inter-war years, the focus of writers, intellectuals, and activists was entirely on the Mashriq, the formerly Ottoman, predominantly Arabic-speaking lands east of Suez. In Egypt, opposition elements were the first to embrace Arab nationalism and include Egypt within the boundaries of the imagined Arab homeland.³ Eventually, its geographical

²Hisham Aïdi, "The (African) Arab Cup," Dec. 13, 2022, [https://africasacountry.com/2022/12/the-afro-arab-cup](https://africasacountry.com/2022/12/the-afro-arab-cup;); and Yael Warshel, "So-called firsts scored by the Moroccan 'Muslim, Arab, African, post-colonial and Amazigh' Atlas Lions at the 2022 World Cup football games," *The Journal of North African Studies* 28, no. 2 (March 2023), 219–29.

³C. Ernest Dawn, "The Formation of pan-Arab Ideology in the Inter-War Years," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 20, no. 1 (Feb. 1988), 67–91.

under King Mohammed VI, give short shrift to the “Arab” dimension of Moroccan foreign policy.⁸

The colonial era

Notwithstanding Morocco’s peripheral status in the Arab world, its history has been intertwined with the lands of the Mashriq since the Muslim armies’ conquests and Islamization of North Africa, beginning in the late seventh century A.D. Combatting French colonialism in the Maghrib was very much a part of the Muslim intellectual Shakib Arslan’s tireless promotion of Islamic nationalism during the 1920s and 30s.⁹ By the early 1930s, the seeds of the Moroccan and Algerian nationalist movements had sprouted, and contained a substantial measure of modern Islamic reform ideas. As in the Mashriq, these became inseparable from *‘uruba*. In Algeria, reformist *‘ulama* articulated an Arab-Islamic identity that became a fundamental reference point for the national movement.¹⁰ From a different, and less discussed angle, the influence of Egypt-centered Arab mass culture “forged a stronger link with the Arab east than the *Salafiyya* ever could.”¹¹

Michael Stenner’s work further deepened our knowledge of the social networks of solidarity that young Moroccan nationalists fashioned with their counterparts in the Arab East. Some of them were disciples of Arslan, who “equipped the nationalists with legitimacy in the eyes of Middle Eastern Arabs they had lacked until then.”¹² A Moroccan delegation headed by two leading activists attended the 1931 General Islamic Congress in Jerusalem,¹³ and another delegation attended the Arabic-Islamic Parliamentary Conference for the Defense of Palestine in Cairo in 1938. Hundreds of Moroccan students

⁸Susan Gilson Miller, *A History of Modern Morocco* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Michael Willis, *Power and Politics in the Maghreb* (London: Hurst, 2012); Daniel Zisenwine, “Mohammed VI and Moroccan Foreign Policy,” in *Contemporary Morocco: State, Politics and Society under Mohammed VI*, ed. Bruce Maddy-Weitzman and Daniel Zisenwine (London and NY: Routledge, 2013), 70–81; Anouar Boukhars, *Politics in Morocco: Executive Monarchy and Enlightened Authoritarianism* (Abingdon, Oxon, and NY: Routledge, 2011); Irene Fernández-Molina, *Moroccan Foreign Policy Under Mohammed VI, 1999–2014* (Abingdon, Oxon, and NY: Routledge, 2016); and Tachfine Baida (ed.), *The Foundations of Moroccan Foreign Policy: An Anthology* (Wilsonville, OR: Sirius Academic Press, 2013).

⁹William L. Cleveland, *Islam against the West: Shakib Arslan and the Campaign for Islamic Nationalism* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1985), 90–114.

¹⁰James McDougall, *History and the Culture of Nationalism in Algeria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 97–143.

¹¹C.R. Pennell, *Morocco Since 1830: A History* (NY: NYU Press, 2000), 237–8. This jibes with Peter Wein’s emphasis on modern cultural expressions of Arab nationalism, even though he does not offer any Moroccan examples. *Arab Nationalism: The Politics of History and Culture in the Modern Middle East* (Abingdon and NY: Routledge, 2017), *passim*. *Salafiyya*, in this context, refers to the movement for religious reform and renewal in the late 19th and early 20th centuries most associated with the teachings of the Egyptian scholar Mohamed Abduh and his disciple Rashid Rida. According to this view, the best way to combat European domination was to return to the Islam of the “virtuous forefathers”, namely, the Prophet Mohamed, his companions and disciples.

¹²Stenner, “Networking for independence: the Moroccan nationalist movement and its global campaign against French colonialism,” *The Journal of North African Studies* 17, 4 (2012), 577.

¹³Martin Kramer, *Islam Assembled: The Advent of the Muslim Congresses* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1986), 132.

Arab diplomatic jockeying culminated in the establishment of the League of Arab States on March 22, 1945, as Arab leaders sought to reinforce their positions vis-a-vis the British and French imperial powers in the coming postwar period. The seven independent (or soon to be independent) signatories of the Arab League's Charter – Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Transjordan, Saudi Arabia and Yemen – pledged to develop closer political, economic, social and cultural ties, while emphasizing respect for the sovereignty and independence of each member state. In fact, the League would mostly be an arena in which inter-Arab rivalries would play out. For our purposes, it is worth noting that the League's Charter included an annex that acknowledged “the aspirations of the Arab countries not members of the [League] Council, and pledged to work toward their realization.”²⁰ Although the countries were not named (and the League now has no less than 22 members), the immediate reference was to Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia, where nationalist opposition to continued French rule was gathering steam. The League's First Secretary-General, ‘Abd al-Rahman ‘Azzam Pasha, would be a tireless advocate of independence for the Maghrib countries throughout his seven years in the position. So was the veteran Iraqi statesman Fadil al-Jamali. As a result, and to France's distinct irritation, attaining the independence of its North African colonies became an integral part of the Arab discourse.²¹

The League's de facto leader was Egypt: its headquarters were in Cairo, ‘Azzam Pasha was an Egyptian official, as were all subsequent secretary-generals, apart from one exception,²² and Egypt headed a loose coalition of five states against the Hashemite monarchies of Iraq and Jordan. It was only natural then, that Cairo became the headquarters of the “Arab Maghrib Office” (*Maktab al-Maghrib al-‘Arabi*), established in 1947 to promote and support the independence movements in Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia. Just a few months later, the *Maktab* scored a major achievement: it persuaded the legendary Riffian exile warrior, ‘Abdelkrim al-Khattabi, to stealthily disembark from the French ship that was to carry him to France after a twenty-one year exile in Reunion, while the vessel was docked in Suez City. Making his way to Cairo, al-Khattabi received a royal welcome from Egypt's King Farouk, and the Moroccan nationalist cause was given an enormous public relations boost.²³ In December, the Committee for the Liberation of the Maghrib, grouping together nationalist activists from all three Maghrib countries, was established in Cairo, with ‘Abdelkrim al-Khattabi as its head. However, he quickly tired of it, finding it lacking a real program of action.

²⁰“Charter of Arab League,” https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/arableag.asp.

²¹David Stenner, *Globalizing Morocco* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019), 71–2.

²²Tunisia's Chedli Klibi held the post during the ten-year hiatus of Egypt's suspension from the League, between 1979–1989.

²³Stenner, *Globalizing Morocco*, 60–67.

the cause of the North African independence movements, and a proposal to revise the League's charter to make the organization more effective.²⁸

The Egyptian Free Officers' coup d'état in July 1952 brought new disappointment to Moroccan nationalists. Moroccan networks in Cairo had recruited Egyptians across the political spectrum, from Hasan al-Banna of the Muslim Brotherhood, to liberal circles. These networks were now a liability, as Egypt's new rulers moved to silence all civil society voices. Egypt thus ceased to render support to the Moroccan nationalist movement, leaving a legacy of bitterness and suspicion that would carry into the post-independence era.

King Mohammed V – 1956–1961

As violence in Algeria escalated during 1955, France's protectorate regimes in Morocco and Tunisia became a liability not worth maintaining. Hence both countries were granted independence in March 1956. France had laid down many of the institutional foundations for a territorially unified and centrally governed independent Moroccan state, with a monarchical form of government.²⁹ Exiling Mohammed V and his family in August 1953 had boomeranged badly, and hence his legitimacy at the dawn of independence was unchallenged. Still the tasks of state-building and nation building had only just begun. Consolidating control over Morocco's geographically, economically, and socially diverse regions, ameliorating the country's widespread poverty and illiteracy, building a national army, and achieving a consensus regarding the modus operandi of the political system, i.e. the division of power between the Palace and the political classes, constituted daunting tasks. Many of the leaders of the nationalist movement hoped to establish a constitutional monarchy in which the king would be primarily a symbol of national unity, with limited powers only. However, King Mohammed V, and his son Hassan II, who succeeded him in 1961, had no intention of subordinating themselves to the civilian politicians, and the post-independence monarchy was fashioned into the country's central ruling institution.

Already in 1955, Egypt's Abdel Nasser had begun changing the rules of the inter-Arab game, appealing over the heads of conservative, pro-Western regimes to their publics, in the name of anti-imperialism and restoring Arab dignity. By the end of 1956, he was the unchallenged all-Arab hero, having nationalized the Suez Canal and survived the British-French-Israeli attacks designed to bring him to heel. Abdel Nasser's mass appeal could hardly be ignored by Mohammed V, and the position of secular left-of-center politicians sympathetic to Abdel Nasser's pan-Arab message had to be taken into account

²⁸el Fassi, 402–14.

²⁹Jonathan Wyrzten, *Making Morocco: Colonial Intervention and the Politics of Identity* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2015), particularly 62–92, 248–272.

King Hassan II – 1961–1999

Over time, and especially after barely surviving two attempted coups d'état in the early 1970s, Hassan attained complete hegemony over Moroccan political and economic life.³³ He reinforced his position by assuming active roles in the inter-Arab and Arab-Israeli arenas, and gradually attained the stature of a worldly and pragmatic international statesman.

Hassan's ascent to power came at the peak of the era of radical pan-Arabism embodied by Abdel Nasser and the pan-Arab Ba'th party. Like his father, Hassan was concerned mainly with avoiding revolutionary anti-regime activities of the kind that had toppled or threatened to topple a string of Arab monarchies.³⁴ He therefore strove to maintain good terms with Arab states across the ideological spectrum, and thus avoided being dragged into the toxic dynamics that characterized the "Arab Cold War" between 1958–1970.³⁵ Throughout the remaining nine years of Abdel Nasser's life, Hassan preferred to avoid overt confrontation with him, notwithstanding their radically different ideological orientations. It wasn't always easy: for example, Morocco's slowness in recognizing the new Egyptian-backed republican government in Yemen in Fall 1962 resulted in sharp attacks against it by the Egyptian government-directed press.³⁶

Morocco's geopolitical and ideological rivalry with Algeria added to its problems with Egypt. Both Morocco and Egypt had given aid and succor to the Algerian FLN in its war for independence. But ideologically, Abdel Nasser's Egypt strongly identified with the victorious revolutionary socialist regime in Algiers, and provided it with military and economic aid. During the three-week War of the Sands between Morocco and Algeria over their disputed frontier in September-October 1963, Egypt shipped tanks, half-tracks, and other armored vehicles and cannon, a battalion of troops, and six long-range Soviet planes to the outgunned Algerian army. On the political front, Abdel Nasser sent a letter to Hassan that urged him, in the name of the Arab national interest, to stop the fighting. He reiterated the gist of an Arab League proposal, formulated following two meetings on the subject, calling for a ceasefire and withdrawal of troops to their previous position. Abdel Nasser also suggested an emergency meeting of North African heads of state, including his bitter foe, Tunisia's Habib Bourguiba and Libya's King Idris, with his possible participation as well, to discuss the frontier question. The letter

³³The classic book on Moroccan politics, and the centrality of the monarchy, remains John Waterbury's, *The Commander of the Faithful* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1970). For a more recent study of how the ruling dynasty has successfully made use of tradition, symbols, and ritual to maintain its hegemony over the country's political life, see Mohammed Daadaoui, *Moroccan Monarchy and the Islamist Challenge: Maintaining Makhzen Power* (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

³⁴Bruce Maddy-Weitzman, "Why Did Arab Monarchies Fall? An Analysis of Old and New Explanations," In *Middle East Monarchies: The Challenge of Modernity*, ed. Joseph Kostiner (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2000), 37–52.

³⁵Kerr, *The Arab Cold War*, *passim*.

³⁶Gallagher, *The United States and North Africa*, 223.

on the conflict, limiting itself to unspecified support of “the integrity of the Moroccan territorial sovereignty.” This suited Morocco just fine, as it had the backing of a large bloc of Arab states (mostly the monarchies), led by Saudi Arabia. The Saudis even sent a delegation to participate in Morocco’s three hundred fifty thousand person “Green March” to reclaim the territory from Spain.⁴² Beginning in the 1980s, Riyadh provided large sums to help finance the two thousand kilometer berm fortifications that decisively stabilized the conflict, to Morocco’s advantage. Among Arab League members, only Algeria, Syria and Libya have recognized the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), the Polisario’s official government-in-exile.⁴³ By the end of 2022, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan and Bahrain had all opened consulates in Moroccan-controlled areas of Western Sahara, and ten League members were part of the UAE-lead thirty-five member international “Support Group for the Territorial Integrity of the Moroccan Kingdom.”⁴⁴

The road to the June 1967 Arab-Israeli war

Avoiding inter-Arab disputes was especially important for Morocco as the Arab-Israeli conflict escalated in the mid-1960s. The first all-Arab summit conference, held in Cairo in January 1964, was convened by Abdel Nasser to try and damp down criticism of his failure to bloc Israel’s National Water Carrier project, and reassert his leadership over a fractious Arab house. The summit conference would become de facto the supreme decision-making of the Arab League. King Hassan hosted the third of these summits, in Casablanca in 1965, and a number of subsequent ones many of which quite consequential. In doing so, the king accrued prestige and thus strengthened his standing domestically, regionally, and internationally. More generally, the first summit conferences were markers of a process reconciling the meaning of Arab nationalism with individual state sovereignty and the legitimacy of the territorial status quo.⁴⁵ For Arab monarchs being targeted by Arab radicals as “reactionaries” and tools of imperialism, and therefore destined for the dustbin of history, the summit conference institution was worth embracing. The Arab Solidarity Charter adopted at Casablanca in 1965 reasserted the principles of the League Charter promoting solidarity, mutual respect, and non-interference in each other’s internal affairs, as opposed to the ideological wars promoted by the radicals.⁴⁶ For Hassan, this was pitch perfect.

⁴²Samir Bennis, “The Moroccan-Saudi Rift: The Shattering of a Privileged Political Alliance,” April 3, 2019. <https://studies.aljazeera.net/ar/node/1618>.

⁴³These three, together with the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen, made up the “Steadfastness and Confrontation Front” during the 1980s. The PDRY also recognized SADR. It went out of business in 1990, merging with the Yemen Arab Republic.

⁴⁴Sara Zouiten, “UAE Leads 35 Countries in Renewing Support for Morocco’s Territorial Integrity,” Morocco World News, Sept. 13, 2022. <https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2022/09/351336/uae-leads-35-countries-in-renewing-support-for-moroccos-territorial-integrity>.

⁴⁵Barnett, *Dialogues in Arab Politics*, 146–53.

⁴⁶Sela, *The Decline*, 82–84.

The episode was part of a larger story of Moroccan-Israeli relations, one that combined elements of realpolitik and a less tangible intertwining of history, myth, sentiment, and personal connections involving the Moroccan monarchy, Moroccan Jewry, and the Israeli government. From Jerusalem's perspective, links with Rabat constituted an extension of its "periphery" policy, the cultivation of non-Arab actors on the Middle East periphery to counterbalance the pressure of radical, hostile Arab states.⁵³ Both Mohammed V and Hassan II believed that Israel was here to stay, and that the clock could not be rolled back to times before 1948. As already discussed, Morocco was keen on keeping the radical Arab nationalist current at bay, and a moderate approach to Arab-Israeli issues helped reinforce the kingdom's military and economic ties with Western countries against the radical states backed by the Soviet Union.

On the eve of Israel's independence, Morocco's Jewish community numbered two hundred seventy thousand. Growing uncertainty over their future in an independent Morocco resulted in one hundred thousand of them departing between 1948–1956, and thousands more in the following five years. The flow of Moroccan Jews, facilitated by Mossad networks in Morocco, was barely a secret and drew sharp criticism from left-wing politicians brandishing the claim of "aiding an enemy state." The turning point came following the drowning of forty-two Moroccan Jews when a boat ferrying them to Gibraltar sank in a storm off the Moroccan coast, causing an uproar internationally. Hassan's ascent to the throne took place six weeks later, and he quickly arranged an orderly departure process of another one hundred thousand Jews over the next five years, bolstering his image in the West (and probably benefitting himself financially from the arrangement).

With security considerations overlapping with understandings regarding Moroccan Jewry, Israeli and Moroccan interests now aligned more closely. To assist Morocco during the 1963 War of the Sands, Israel sent an intelligence officer to Morocco to report on Egyptian and Algerian activities, and a journalist to assist in the psychological/informational aspects of the war. Morocco, in turn, shared information about the Egyptian military that would later prove to be helpful to Israel, some of it gleaned from the interrogation of the captured Egyptian officers.⁵⁴

Ties with the top echelons of the Moroccan security services quickly expanded, and the Mossad established a relatively large station in Rabat.⁵⁵ The regime's strongman and Hassan confidante, Gen. Mohammed Oufkir, was an ideal interlocutor for Israel, and contacts with him dated back to at least the beginning of 1960. An ethnic Amazigh from Morocco's southeast, Oufkir was utterly disdainful of the urban Arab political and cultural elites, and would have preferred that Morocco not be a member of the Arab

⁵³Yossi Alpher, *Periphery: Israel's Search for Middle East Allies* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 25–28.

⁵⁴Podeh, *From Mistress to Known Partner*, 488.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 486–87.

it by closing the Gulf of Aqaba and calling for a general mobilization a week before the fighting began.⁶¹

The collective Arab defeat in 1967 was a Waterloo for Arab radical regimes that had staked their legitimacy on confronting Israel. Their defeat gave the Moroccan monarchy and other conservative monarchies essential room to breathe. It also reconfirmed to Hassan that a diplomatic resolution to the Arab-Israeli conflict that would address Palestinian grievances was the right path to follow. During the next six years, Morocco would continue to balance its commitment to Arab and Islamic sensibilities, while maintaining a pragmatic line in international and regional forums. It lined up with the Saudi-led conservative bloc at the Khartoum 1967 Arab summit, and hosted Islamic and Arab summits in 1969. Although Hassan disparaged Abdel Nasser and other Arab leaders in his conversations with foreign diplomats, he also spoke favorably to the US about Abdel Nasser's appeal for peace to the Americans in spring 1970, and at Abdel Nasser's request, no less.⁶²

Abdel Nasser's passing on September 29, 1970 symbolized the definitive end of the era of radical pan-Arabism. Although Libya's Mu' ammar al-Qaddafi and Algeria subsequently sponsored a group of young leftist plotters against the Moroccan throne (the plot was broken up in early 1973), the main threat to Hassan's rule now came from the army, in the form of two consecutive attempted coups d'état in 1971 and 1972, the second one led by Oufkir himself. There is a broad consensus among scholars that the motivations behind the coups were not explicitly "Berber" in nature, but that there was nonetheless a "Berber coloring," namely a certain level of solidarity with the plotters' activities, characterized by common backgrounds, professional and social links and concern for both their personal and the country's future.⁶³ Discussions of the Berber dimension of the attempted coups angered Hassan who called references to the matter racist colonialist, accusations that falsely posited Morocco as a country divided between Arabs and non-Arabs. Morocco, he emphasized, was "a Muslim state, whose language is Arabic, and it is a member of the Arab League."⁶⁴

As part of his reassertion of control over the military after the second coup attempt, King Hassan announced on February 22, 1973 that motorized

⁶¹Lawrence Rosen, *Two Arabs, a Berber and a Jew: Entangled Lives in Morocco* (Chicago: University Press of Chicago, 2016), 248–55. For a summary of developments related to Morocco's Jewish community during the year, see Dishon, *ibid.*, 308.

⁶²Foreign Relations of The United States, 1958–1960, Arab-Israeli Dispute; United Arab Republic; North Africa, Vol XIII, "Memorandum From the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, Document 104, Washington, June 3, 1970, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v13/d362>; and "Draft Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Morocco," Document No. 105, Washington, June 5, 1970, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve05p2/d105>.

⁶³Frank H. Braun, "Morocco: Anatomy of a Palace Revolution that Failed," *IJMES*, 9 (1978), 63–72; John Waterbury, "The Coup Manqué"; and A. Coram, "The Berbers and the Coup," in Gellner and Micaud (eds.), 397–423, 425–30.

⁶⁴US NA, RG59, Confidential Tel. 0831, Rabat to Secretary of State, (Priority 8263), Feb. 23, 1973; "Le Discours Royal," *Maroc Soir*, Feb. 23, 1973.

against Arab criticism. In a televised address, Hassan declared that no one in the Arab Mashriq could give Morocco “lessons in patriotism,” for they had been “languid” (*khamilun*) for twenty years. By contrast, “the courageous Moroccan people,” he declared, “would have never abandoned their land to Israeli occupation for so long.”⁶⁷

The Fez principles were a slightly altered version of an eight-point proposal originally put forth by Saudi Crown Prince Fahd in 1981. Throughout the decade and beyond, Rabat and Riyadh worked largely in tandem. Morocco was also supportive of the United Arab Emirates, stationing five thousand troops there in 1986, in response to heightened concern over Gulf security posed by the expansion of the Iran-Iraq war. As already noted, the Saudis provided crucial funding for Morocco’s berm in the Western Sahara. It was also thanks to Saudi Arabia that in 1975 King Hassan was named head of the “Al-Quds Committee” by the Organization of the Islamic Conference; the Committee was designed to preserve the Islamic character of Jerusalem.⁶⁸ Fahd helped engineer a border meeting between Hassan and Algerian president Chadli Bendjedid in February 1983, the first such meeting of the two heads of state since relations had been severed in 1976 following the armed clashes in the Western Sahara; likewise, Morocco joined Saudi Arabia (and Algeria), on a three-member committee designated by the Arab League, to curb Syrian hegemony in Lebanon in 1989 (the effort failed).⁶⁹

Morocco’s special relationship with Saudi Arabia, and its singular approach to all-Arab affairs in general, was displayed during the 1990–91 Gulf crisis. Iraq’s August 2, 1990 invasion of Kuwait, Hassan told the Moroccan parliament, was likely to be a dividing line in Arab history whose impact would last for decades. Like Egypt, Syria and the smaller Gulf principalities, Morocco dispatched troops to Saudi Arabia – in this case, a symbolic contingent numbering 1,200 to bolster it against Iraq. At the same time, Hassan was among those who feared a regional conflagration and sought to advance a diplomatic solution. To that end, he even sent an envoy to “brother Saddam” Husayn.⁷⁰ Moroccan forces were kept separate from the others in the Western-Arab coalition that was assembled, and they played no role in the 1991 war that evicted Iraqi forces from Kuwait. A massive, albeit orderly anti-war demonstration in Rabat on February 3, 1991, showed where Moroccan public opinion lay, and helped explain why Hassan walked a tightrope on the issue of the war. Hassan made the point that the troops had been dispatched

⁶⁷ *Al-Mithaq al-Watani*, July 25, 1986.

⁶⁸ Sarah Bennis “The Moroccan-Saudi Rift: The Shattering of a Privileged Political Alliance,” April 3, 2019, <https://studies.aljazeera.net/ar/node/1618>. In response to a fire at the Al-Aqsa Mosque in 1969, Morocco and Saudi Arabia spearheaded the holding of a summit of Islamic states in Rabat, which sharply condemned Israel. The summit laid the groundwork for the ICO’s establishment.

⁶⁹ Bruce Maddy-Weitzman, “Inter-Arab Relations,” in *Middle East Contemporary Survey*, Vol. XIII, 1989, Ami Ayalon (ed.) (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1991), 138–43.

⁷⁰ Rabat RTM TV, October 12 – FBIS, Daily Report, Oct. 16, 1990.

thus maintaining societal and regime stability. Favorable regional and global developments reinforced Hassan's position. A UN-led ceasefire and political process for the Western Sahara was to his liking; the Gulf War had ended without touching off a larger regional explosion; and the breakup of the Soviet Union created a moment of unipolarity that promised a better future for countries allied with the victorious West, beginning with the jump-starting of an Arab-Israeli peace process via the Madrid Peace Conference in Fall 1991. Nearly all Arab countries were represented in one form or another (the secretary-generals of the GCC and AMU attended as observers).

The Israeli-PLO agreement in September 1993, brokered in Oslo and signed on the White House lawn, was a validation of Morocco's long held position on the Arab-Israeli conflict. Hassan received Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and his entourage on their way back from Washington. An additional Israeli-Palestinian interim agreement and the conclusion of an Israeli-Jordanian peace treaty enabled Morocco to officially join the party, so to speak. On September 1, 1994, the two countries announced that they would open low-level diplomatic offices in Rabat and Tel Aviv. At the end of October, the first Middle East and North Africa Economic Conference was held in Casablanca, bringing together a large-scale conclave of senior officials from Israel, numerous Arab states, the US, Europe and Japan, and representatives from the private sector. For Hassan, the conference embodied his promotion of a more benign and cooperative future for the region, as well as allowing Morocco to bask in the international limelight.

Mohammed VI, 1999–

Ascending to the throne in July 1999 following his father's passing, Mohammed VI sought almost immediately to heal long-standing societal wounds, allowing political exiles to return, releasing the leading Islamist figure from house arrest, and partially embracing the Amazigh current, whose voice was now being heard more loudly. A manifesto, drawn up in 2000 and signed by more than 250 intellectuals, rejected the notion that Morocco's identity was exclusively Arab identity: "We the Amazigh ... who are proud of our *Amazighité* ... are brothers to the Arabs ... we jointly form one body ... [with] our fellow citizens who are proud of their '*Arabité*.' We believe that diversity is an enrichment ... and a sharpener of human designs ... what causes separatism and group splitting is [not] multilingualism ... but a lack of civilizational maturity."⁷² The following year, the king publicly embraced Amazigh culture as a constituent component of Moroccan identity.

Concurrently, the outbreak of the second Palestinian intifada in late September 2000 forced Morocco to recalibrate its relations with Israel and

⁷²"The Berber Manifesto," <https://www.culturaelibri.com/the-berber-manifesto/>.

A year earlier, Morocco had joined seven other Arab states in supporting Saudi Arabia's military intervention in the Yemen civil war against the Houthis who, backed by Iran, had taken over large swaths of territory, including the capital San'a. As in the 1990–91 Gulf crisis, Morocco's contribution to the Saudi-led coalition was extremely modest – six warplanes, one of which was shot down, and 1500 troops. But unlike in 1991, this episode did not end well. Morocco withdrew its contingent in 2019, amidst increasing criticism of the civilian casualties resulting from the Saudi bombing campaign. In response, the Saudi-owned *al-‘Arabiya* TV channel ran a program critical of Morocco's position on the Western Sahara, calling Polisario the legitimate representative of the Sahrawis. Morocco, in turn, recalled its ambassador for consultations, and did the same vis-a-vis the UAE after the latter had recalled its ambassador from Rabat.

Concurrent with the Yemen war, the Saudi-led campaign to isolate and punish Qatar in 2017 was no less problematic for Rabat. Saudi Arabia and the UAE were Morocco's long-time allies, and only France had a higher amount of direct investment in the country than them. But relations with Qatar had also flourished in recent years, and Doha too was a major investor in the country. Qatar's natural gas played an important role in Morocco's future energy plans. Moreover, the Islamist PJD party, which headed Morocco's coalition governments between 2011–2021, identified with Qatar's support for the Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamist current in general, something that was one of the sources of Saudi Arabia and the UAE's anger with Qatar. Hence, Morocco declared itself neutral, refused to join the boycott and sanctions regime, and sent humanitarian aid to Qatar. Mohammed VI even traveled to Abu Dhabi and Doha in an effort to reconcile the opposing sides.⁷⁴ According to one knowledgeable analyst, thousands of Moroccans went to Qatar to contribute their expertise in food production, agriculture, and other blockaded sectors.⁷⁵ The resulting tension with Saudi Arabia was made apparent by Morocco's failure to host Saudi Crown Prince and regime strongman Mohammed Bin Salman during his tour of North African states, and by Moroccan anger over Saudi Arabia's failure to support Morocco's bid to host the 2026 World Cup.

To Morocco's satisfaction, the boycott and isolation campaign ended in early 2021, and Rabat's relations with the Gulf monarchies returned to normal. Moreover, Morocco was delighted that the GCC's reconciliation summit also emphasized the "special strategic partnership between the GCC and the Kingdom of Morocco," and its unwavering support for the sovereignty of Morocco and its territorial integrity," i.e. for the "Moroccan Sahara."⁷⁶ Indeed,

⁷⁴Haim Malka, "Maghreb Neutrality: Maghreb-Gulf Arab Ties Since the GCC Split," Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 11, 2018, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/maghreb-neutrality-maghreb-gulf-arab-ties-gcc-split>.

⁷⁵Abdulaziz Kilani and Giorgio Cafiero, "Morocco is a Winner of the Al-Ula Summit," *Al Sharq Strategic Research*, Feb. 25, 2021, <https://research.sharqforum.org/2021/02/25/morocco-is-a-winner/>.

⁷⁶Ibid.

bonds of Arab identity continued to exist across national frontiers. At the same time, “being Arab” was now less of a tool in states’ foreign policies, and was folded into domestic debates about the role of Islam in political life and in the shaping of collective identity. Moreover, the Amazigh factor was very much a part of North Africa’s increasingly contested politics during the ensuing decade. Expressed in a variety of political and cultural ways, it became an integral part of the Maghrib’s increasingly contested public sphere. As surviving regimes struggled to recover their fraying legitimacy, and new ones sought to attain it, they could no longer ignore the Amazigh dimensions of their societies, even as their strategies ranged from partial acknowledgment and co-option to overt repression.⁷⁸

This was certainly true in Morocco. The 2011 protests there were widespread, heterogeneous, and designed to achieve fundamental reform in the state’s governing institutions, but not to topple them. Morocco’s large and diverse Amazigh communities were integral participants in the country’s increasingly contested public sphere, in numerous ways.⁷⁹ Although the Palace’s adroit maneuverings and cosmetic reforms quickly took the wind out of the sails of the protests, the Moroccan Amazigh movement registered a major achievement – the constitutional recognition of Tamazight as an official language of the state, “being common patrimony of all Moroccans without exception.”⁸⁰ Morocco was thus only the second member of the Arab League to confer official recognition on an additional language alongside of Arabic (post-Saddam Iraq did so in 2005; Algeria belatedly followed the Moroccan example, in 2016). The Amazigh issue was also addressed more broadly in the constitution’s preamble. Emphasizing the theme of diversity within unity, Morocco’s national identity was declared to have been “forged by the convergence of its Arab-Islamic, Amazigh and Saharo-hassanian components, nourished and enriched by its African, Andalusian, Hebraic and Mediterranean tributaries (*rawafid*).” In addition, the constitution no longer declared that Morocco was part of the “Grand **Arab** Maghrib” (author’s emphasis), instead reverting back to the 1962 formula that referred to the “Grand Maghrib.” The removal of “Arab” was a further nod to the Amazigh movement, which forcefully rejects the idea that Morocco is an “Arab” nation, or that the Maghrib as a whole is “Arab.”⁸¹

Translating Tamazight’s newly recognized status into a social and political reality was another matter. Neither the country’s political class, led by the

⁷⁸Bruce Maddy-Weitzman, *Amazigh Politics in the Wake of the Arab Spring* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2022), *passim*.

⁷⁹Angel Suarez Collado, “The Amazigh Movement in Morocco: New Generations, New References of Mobilization and New Forms of Opposition,” *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 6 (2013): 55–74.

⁸⁰The official Arabic text of the constitution can be found at, <https://learningpartnership.org/resource/constitution-morocco-document-arabic>. An English translation can be found at https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Morocco_2011.

⁸¹*Ibid.*

it. Activists identified with parallel nationalist movements in Cairo and the Arab East, and sought their support. The Arab League Charter's pledge to work toward the realization of aspirations of Arab countries that were not yet independent indicated which way the wind was blowing in France's North African possessions, and elsewhere.

Morocco attained its independence at a critical moment in the inter-Arab system. Gamal Abdel Nasser was emerging as the all-Arab hero, threatening to undermine the legitimacy of regimes that did not follow his revolutionary pan-Arab path. Next door in Algeria, the violent struggle between Algerian nationalists and France shifted into higher gear, becoming a touchstone for anti-colonial sentiment everywhere, and drawing Morocco, Tunisia and Cairo into the fray as supporters of Algerian independence. For Mohammed V, avoiding the Arab Cold War and maintaining proper relations with Arab radical and conservative regimes alike was the natural choice, as he sought to ensure his preeminence over the political echelons at home, some of whom identified viscerally with a more radical version of Arabism than had existed in previous decades. Good relations across the spectrum of Arab states were also instrumental for the king in asserting his nationalist credentials on the issue of Mauritania, whose territory was part of the Istiqlal's vision of a Greater Morocco.

Hassan II broadly followed the path laid out by his father. The 1960s were a momentous decade both domestically and regionally. Radical pan-Arabism, embodied by Abdel Nasser, the Ba'ath regimes in Syria and Iraq, and newly independent Algeria, placed conservative Arab regimes on the defensive. For the most part, Hassan dodged direct confrontation with Abdel Nasser, and officially adhered to the collective Arab position vis-à-vis Israel. But he also quietly developed a strategic relationship with Israel to help ensure his survival.

The collective Arab defeat in 1967, and Abdel Nasser's passing in 1970, was a fatal blow to the radical pan-Arab vision, and provided conservative Arab regimes with a new layer of security. For Hassan, the war's results confirmed the correctness of his pragmatic approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict and gave him the space and confidence to take an active diplomatic role within Arab summit conferences, particularly after the October 1973 war jump started Arab-Israeli diplomacy. Having achieved complete hegemony over all political opposition at home during the infamous "years of lead" (from the late 1960s to the late 1980s), Hassan successfully fashioned his own mix of Arabism, adherence to Islamic values, and pursuits of Moroccan state interests. Central to the latter was the incorporation of the Western Sahara into the kingdom. Saudi Arabia's financial support for Morocco's network of fortifications in the territory was an important marker of Morocco's deepening ties with Gulf Arab states. In 1989, a temporary thaw in Moroccan-Algerian relations enabled the establishment of the 5-nation Arab Maghrib Union, which offered the possibility of closer economic and political ties among the members within the larger framework of the Arab state system, alongside the GCC and newly established ACC. But this

Istiqlal, as well as myriad economic and bureaucratic elements with a vested interest in maintaining the status quo, also looked askance at Amazigh demands.

In any case, Morocco's relations with Arab Mashriq countries were now increasingly devoid of traditional markers of Arab solidarity and brotherhood. Instead, Morocco's ties with the Gulf countries were based on concrete economic and strategic interests, anchored by a common Sunni Islamic affiliation. The kingdom's close ties with the Gulf countries, combined with the hollowing out of the traditional core of the inter-Arab system, meant that notions of "center and periphery" in the Arab system had lost their meaning. Arabism was no longer an ideological construct that shaped Moroccan foreign policy, and the Amazigh factor was increasingly salient in the Moroccan collective discourse. In that light, the debates over Morocco's national identity occasioned by the national team's performance at the World Cup were hardly surprising.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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